

Estonia Takes Slow Road to Freedom

Lithuania's Baltic Neighbor Avoids Direct Challenge to Moscow, but Seeks Same Result

By Elizabeth Shogren
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TALLINN, U.S.S.R.—While world attention has been focused on Lithuania's fight for independence, another Baltic republic has been attempting to demonstrate that the same ends can be achieved by less confrontational means.

"The Lithuanians declared the goal first and now they are trying to implement it step by step. We are implementing it first and will declare success when we achieve it," said Trevimi Velliste, a leader of the independence movement in Estonia, the smallest of the Soviet Union's 15 republics. "You can't call a country *de facto* independent when it is heavily occupied by the Soviet army and the KGB."

The Estonian legislature, controlled by separatist deputies, declared Soviet law invalid in the republic last Friday. The resolution also initiated a period of transition from Soviet control rather than following Lithuania in declaring the immediate restoration of its independence.

"You can't get a divorce without getting married first."

— Estonian legislator Endel Lippmaa

Estonia's stage-by-stage approach to independence reflects the diversity of the centrifugal forces let loose by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of democratization and *glasnost*, or openness. The nationalist movements may be striving for the same goal—the breakup of a huge multinational state that they regard as the world's last remaining empire—but their economic and political starting points are very different.

The bold steps recently taken by Lithuania, whose population is relatively homogeneous, are much more difficult to contemplate in Estonia, with its large Russian minority. Ethnic frictions, which helped make the Estonian Popular Front a pacesetter for nationalist movements in 1988, are now slowing down the republic's move toward independence.

"Over the past year and a half, Estonians have lagged behind Lithuanians in the drive for independence and have tried to avoid taking on Moscow directly. That's quite different than the beginning, when Estonia was the leader," said a Moscow-based diplomat who specializes in the Baltics.

Unlike Lithuania, Estonia has not destroyed the symbols of Soviet power. A huge bronze head of Vladimir Lenin, founder of the Soviet state, and two Soviet seals decorate the front of the Estonian legislature's chamber in Tallinn's Toompea Castle. The flags of both the Soviet republic of Estonia and independent Estonia were flying at the entrance.

Moscow has not responded as aggressively to Estonia as it has to Lithuania, where Soviet forces have occupied several buildings, tanks and armored personnel carriers have been paraded through the capital and army deserters have been brutally arrested.

But Estonia's tactics have not gone unnoticed. On Tuesday Gorbachev called Arnold Ruutel, president of the Estonian Supreme Soviet, and warned him that the tiny republic is at risk of being treated in the same way as Lithuania.

Gorbachev said last Friday's resolution must be annulled, Ruutel told reporters during a break at the legislature Wednesday.

Gorbachev also asked Ruutel to explain the refusal of Estonian members of the national legislature to participate in Tuesday's passage of a law on secession that imposes a five-year waiting period on any republic claiming its independence.

The Estonian legislators wanted to stress that they consider Estonia an occupied country that never joined the Soviet Union, so it cannot secede. "You can't get a divorce without getting married first," said Endel Lippmaa, an Estonian member of the Soviet congress.

Leaders of the Estonian legisla-

ture said that instead of following any secession procedure, they want to negotiate with the Kremlin to restore the independence stripped from them when Soviet troops occupied their country 50 years ago.

One of Estonia's first steps toward independence was electing a new Congress of Estonia as an alternative to the official legislature, or Supreme Soviet, which many Estonians regard as a quisling institution. The Congress was elected Feb. 24 by citizens of the prewar Estonian republic and their descendants, and convened in Tallinn March 11. Last week the newly elected Supreme Soviet passed a resolution recognizing the Congress as the "representative organ of citizens of the Estonian Republic."

The Congress will be an important player in Estonia's drive to end Soviet rule and could replace the Supreme Soviet if Estonia declares independence. Thirty-eight members of the Congress are also members of the current legislature.

The Kremlin's failure to react to the election of the Congress indicates how preoccupied it has been with other problems. Velliste, one of the leaders of the new body, explains Moscow's apparent apathy by saying, "We're overshadowed by Lithuania."

The Estonian legislature has voiced support of Lithuania in a resolution and has called on Moscow to stop using "military pressure" and "political provocation."

Marju Lauristin, deputy speaker of the Estonian parliament and a member of the national legislature, said she and other leaders of the independence movement are grateful to Lithuania. "Lithuania made a very important breakthrough. It made the first step. Now Estonia can help with the practical steps ahead," she said.